



Promote responsibility; help your child learn new skills

Responsibility goes hand in hand with independence—and both support school success. To teach responsibility, put your child in charge of doing some tasks on his own.

Then, take these four steps:

- 1. Model the skill** for your child. If you want your child to become responsible for making his bed, for example, have him watch you do it a few times.
- 2. Practice the skill** with your child. After your child is familiar with the process, make the bed together. You could pull up the sheet, while he pulls up the comforter and puts the pillow on top.
- 3. Watch your child.** He should make the bed himself for a few days while you supervise. This step may be the longest in the process. Don't expect the bed to be made the way you would make it, and don't remake it. The idea is not perfection. It is to develop your child's desire to do it and belief that he *can* do it.
- 4. Work the skill** into your child's routine. Usually, performing a task repeatedly over time makes it familiar enough to become a habit. Another helpful idea is to have him perform the task at around the same time every day. If your child gets used to getting up, getting dressed and making his bed, in the same order, around the same time every day, you may not have to remind him about the task.

Teach your preschooler about animals



Learning about animals is a great early science lesson for your young child.

Spring is a natural time to focus on this. Many kinds of animals are having new babies in the spring.

Here are some ways to help your preschooler learn more about baby animals:

- **Read a book** about your child's favorite animal and how it cares for its young. Choose a book with lots of pictures. Ask your child's preschool teacher for suggestions.
- **Visit animals.** If you live near a farm or zoo, take your child to see baby animals up close. If not, look for examples closer to home, such as baby birds that have hatched from eggs in a nest.
- **Teach new vocabulary.** Does your child know that the name of a baby animal often differs from the name of its parent? She may already know some adult and baby animal names, such as *dog* and *puppy*. Use pictures of animals to teach your child *cow* and *calf*, *horse* and *foal*, and others.

A bird feeder can promote your preschooler's observation skills



Making a bird feeder with your preschooler is a wonderful way to teach her about caring for nature and help her

learn more about birds!

You'll need:

- **String.**
- **Half of a stale bagel.**
- **Peanut butter.**
- **Shortening.**
- **Bird seed.**

Tie one end of the string to the bagel through its hole. Then mix one teaspoon each of peanut butter and shortening. Spread the mixture onto the bagel. Press the coated side of the bagel into bird seed. Hang the feeder outside and watch who enjoys it!

Note that some bird seeds are designed to attract certain birds. Keep a bird guide handy to help you and your child identify the birds you see. You can use binoculars or a camera to get a better look. Ask your child to draw a picture of each bird that visits her feeder.

For more bird feeding tips, visit www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/feeding_birds.html.

“You can learn so much just by observing.”

—Jessica Williams

Books with human characters teach children ethical behavior



Want to build your child's character? Fill his bookshelf with stories featuring ethical characters—the two-legged kind. Studies

show that stories featuring humans are better at teaching social skills than books with “human-like” animals.

This doesn't mean young children don't love animal stories. They do! It simply means that when it comes to demonstrating values, kids learn best from fellow humans.

Why? Possibly because kids can “see themselves” in other people in a way they can't in animals. When an animal character behaves well, children might not grasp what that behavior has to do with them. But when a human character does the right thing, they relate.

Here are a few titles to share with your child. They all feature human characters making positive choices.

- *The Quiltmaker's Gift* by Jeff Brumbeau. A seamstress agrees to stitch a fancy quilt for the selfish king on one condition: that he give away his other possessions. By the end, the ruler learns that giving is more satisfying than greed.
- *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams. After a fire destroys their belongings, a girl and her mother and grandmother collect coins to buy new furniture. Their slow labor of love demonstrates the power of caring and the strength of families.
- *The Empty Pot* by Demi. Ping has a gift for growing flowers. But when his seeds fail to blossom for the emperor, will the little boy tell the powerful man the truth? Yes, because honesty is always the best policy.

Source: N.E. Larsen and others, “Do storybooks with anthropomorphized animal characters promote prosocial behaviors in young children?” *Developmental Science*, Wiley-Blackwell.

Are you building your preschooler's love of reading?



Helping preschoolers enjoy books prepares them to enjoy reading. Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to see

if you're making reading fun for your preschooler:

- ___ **1. Do you have a daily family reading time?** Pick a time when your child seems to enjoy books most.
- ___ **2. Do you let your child help pick which books to read, even if he requests certain favorites over and over?**
- ___ **3. Do you help your child find books about his interests—whether it's dinosaurs, trucks or sports?**
- ___ **4. Do you read with enthusiasm and give characters different voices to make books come alive?**
- ___ **5. Do you read in new places?** Try reading together in a fort made from sheet draped over a table. Enjoy a story during bath time or an audiobook in the car.

How well are you doing?

More *yes* answers mean you're helping your child develop a love of reading. For each *no* answer, try that idea from the quiz.

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Celebrate St. Patrick's Day with fun learning activities



Most preschoolers enjoy fantasy and make-believe, which is why St. Patrick's Day can be so much fun

for them. Here are a few activities to try with your preschooler:

- **Have a scavenger hunt for gold.** Place gold stickers on five of your child's toys and other items. Hide them (in fairly easy-to-find places) and encourage your child to find them. When he finds his gold, celebrate with a healthy green treat, such as grapes cut in half.
- **Turn a green bell pepper into a green shamrock.** Cut off the top of a bell pepper. Press the larger piece of the pepper into green paint. Then, show your child how to stamp it onto white paper. Have him paint a stem and then use crayons, glitter or paint to decorate his shamrock.
- **Try a sensory hunt for gold.** Put beans, rice or sand in a large pan. Mix in some gold coins. (You can make your own gold coins out of yellow construction paper.) Let your child pick out the gold. Be sure to supervise to keep small items out of his mouth and off of the floor!
- **Read books** about St. Patrick's Day with your child. Try, *Jack and the Leprechaun* by Ivan Robertson, *How to Catch a Leprechaun* by Adam Wallace, *The Night Before St. Patrick's Day* by Natasha Wing, or *The Luckiest St. Patrick's Day Ever!* by Teddy Slater.

Discipline works best when parents use effective praise



Studies show that praise is a key part of discipline success. In fact, approval and praise are the most powerful motivators for

positive behavior.

Parenting expert Alan Kazdin, Ph.D., explains that in order for praise to be effective, it should be:

- **Upbeat.** When you praise your child, sound excited.
- **Specific.** Describe exactly what your child did right. "You picked up your toys. That was so helpful. Thank you."
- **Physical.** Reinforce your message with something like a gentle hug, smile or thumbs-up.
- **Instant.** Make sure your praise is given as soon as you are aware of your child's positive behavior.
- **Earned.** Use praise only when it's meaningful—otherwise it will quickly lose its value.
- **Frequent.** You should praise your child more often than you criticize. Parents sometimes mistakenly add criticism to praise. For example, "I asked you to put on your pajamas, and look! Hooray! You got them on!" (There's the praise.) "Too bad you didn't do that last night." (There's the criticism.)

Instead, remain focused on your child's positive behavior and praise it enthusiastically. Kazdin says, "Enthusiastic praise, however sincere you may feel it to be, is always much more effective than sincere punishment, which is the usual alternative."

Source: A. Kazdin, Ph.D., *The Everyday Parenting Toolkit*, Mariner Books.

Q: I am a little concerned about my daughter's ability to pay attention in kindergarten next year. I know kindergarten will involve more seat work than preschool did. Can you explain the attention span needed for kindergarten and give me tips for helping my child?

Questions & Answers

A: Kindergarten does involve more seat work, but this work will take place in small chunks. Kindergarten teachers are well aware that their charges are ages five or six and have a strong need to be active.

In ordinary circumstances, your child will be expected to pay attention to the teacher or to one activity for at least 15 minutes at a time. As the year goes on, she may have to pay attention for up to 25 minutes (for an engaging activity).

To boost your preschooler's attention span:

- **Limit recreational screen time.** Zoning out in front of a video is a passive activity. It feeds a child's desire to be entertained with constant changes of scenery.
- **Encourage time with toys** such as puzzles and blocks. Playing with these builds concentration.
- **Practice following directions.** Start with one-step directions, such as, "Hang your jacket on the hook." Move on to two-step directions, such as, "Bring me the bag and then hang your jacket on the hook." When she masters this, try three steps or more.
- **Read.** This is the best activity of all. Your child learns to engage with the story and use her imagination. Also encourage her to look at books on her own.

The Kindergarten Experience

Communication skills promote peer connections



Shyness isn't a character flaw, so there's nothing "wrong" with being shy. Unfortunately, if your child is shy, it could hurt

his ability to make friends. That's because shy kids are often seen as less likable than more outgoing students.

Studies show that even shy kids with strong vocabularies may not say much around other children. So, the problem may not be that your child doesn't know enough words to communicate well. "Word knowledge" doesn't always go hand in hand with good communication. Instead, it's communication skills themselves that lead to better connections with peers.

The solution? Show your child how to strengthen his communication skills overall. Here's how:

- **Role-play.** Practice having conversations with your child. Remind him to make eye contact when he speaks and to speak clearly.
- **Demonstrate different moods.** Pretend you're bored by what your child is saying. Does he notice? Nudge him! "Did you hear how I sighed when you kept talking? If someone does that, it probably means they're done listening."
- **Change topics.** While chatting, start talking about something else. Can your child make the switch to what you're now discussing? Being able to do so is an important part of communicating well with others.

Source: "Building social communication skills in shy children helps with peer likability," Yale-NUS College, niscw.com/ec_shy.

Strategies can help parents feel more connected to school

It can be challenging to stay involved and feel connected to your child's school—especially in times of remote learning. Here are some strategies to try:

- **Communicate.** Keep in touch with your child's teachers through email and online portals. Tell teachers about any changes in your child's life. Continue to make parent-teacher conferences a priority.
- **Read.** Stay updated on your child's progress and school events by reading all information the school sends home.
- **Socialize.** Meet other parents of kindergartners. Keep in touch through social media, group texts or video chats. The bonds formed in kindergarten can last many years—for kids and parents!
- **Lead.** As your schedule allows, consider leadership roles, such as joining the parent-teacher group



or working on the school improvement plan.

Source: H. Kreider, "Getting Parents 'Ready' for Kindergarten: The Role of Early Childhood Education," Harvard Family Research Project.

Encourage your kindergartner to develop a love of learning



The early school years are a critical time to build a love of learning. To help your child feel excited about school—

whether it's in person or online:

- **Talk about school every day.** Discuss what your child likes best about school.
- **Ask about what she's learning.** See if your child can teach you something new she's learned.
- **Create a brag wall.** There's no better way to celebrate success than to display your child's best work.
- **Talk positively** about your child's teachers. Emphasize how much teachers care about their students.
- **Encourage friendships** with her classmates. If they can't get together in person, maybe you could arrange a short virtual play date with one or two friends.
- **Read together every day.** Children who love books and are comfortable with reading are less likely to be overwhelmed by assignments.